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Thebault-Spieker Conducts Rural Data Collection and Research

Summary: Abbie Thebault-Spieker '16, Bemidji, is researching abandoned school buildings in rural Minnesota.

(August 6, 2013)-Abbie Thebault-Spieker '16, Bemidji, is working with the University of Minnesota, Morris's Center for Small Towns (CST) to conduct research surrounding a multitude of closed, repurposed and abandoned school buildings in west central Minnesota. Over the past few decades there has been a rise in the number of closed school buildings throughout the region. The CST Advisory Council, a group of leaders in the rural development industry with a focus on guiding CST to relevant issues, targeted this as an area needing more exploration.

The council took an interest in abandoned and inoperative schools as it received more calls on the topic. After deciding that data on the issue needed to be found, analyzed, and catalogued, CST hired Thebault-Spieker as a student employee, adding Zak Threadgill '15, Anoka, and Joe Feely '14, Farmington somewhat later. Their tasks include calling communities, school districts, and private groups to collect data in addition to recording the information.

The team is working closely with Kelly Asche, CST community program specialist. They aim to compile a complete qualitative and quantitative report as well as best practices for area communities that have experienced the loss of a local school.

The Center for Small Towns states that the goal of the project is to help small towns make informed decisions that fit the needs of their community. They believe the benefits of this work are wide and broad. According to Asche, "the overall goal is to give small communities information and ideas on what they can do with their buildings and, hopefully, give them a framework to help them decide on next steps." He emphasized how important it is that small towns have precedent to examine as well as a variety of data and resources. Thebault-Spieker added that the team hopes to "help communities reach a consensus or conclusion about what to do with their old buildings."

The University of Minnesota, Morris Center for Small Towns (CST) is a community outreach program that serves as a point-of-entry to the resources of the University of Minnesota. Small towns, local units of government, k-12 schools, nonprofit organizations, and other University units are able to utilize the Center's resources as they work on rural issues or make contributions to rural society. Their mission is to focus the University's attention and marshal its resources toward assisting Minnesota's small towns with locally identified issues by creating applied learning opportunities for faculty and students.

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